

## WORDS THAT MIGHT SAVE NECKS: PHILIPP KHABO KOEPSSELL, EPISTEMIC MURDER AND POETIC JUSTICE<sup>1</sup>

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### ABSTRACT

I begin with a poem of Koepsell's that questions the writing of poetry in times of political upheaval, and whether words can save necks. I then examine the collection *Die Akte James Knopf* for possible answers to those questions. José Medina conceptualises epistemic death, and Koepsell reveals the closeness of epistemic and actual death. I read *Die Akte James Knopf* as both a poetry collection and a dossier of evidence in a case of epistemic murder; it uncovers the mechanisms of racialised knowledge production/perpetuation, and produces what David Lloyd has called poetic justice. Medina writes of guerilla pluralism, which in this context I call provoking pluralism, because it privileges linguistic intervention over violence. In its grammar and effects, provoking pluralism is both irritating and potentially generative. I also conceive of 'guerilla epistemology', which operates a reversal, or revolution, of epistemic privilege. Koepsell provokingly acknowledges that the violence of epistemic injustice is, like other kinds of violence, tied to pleasure: racialised injustice sells. With his poetry and strategic use of humour, I argue, he produces counter-pleasure, which infiltrates dominant knowledge and stimulates change. It might one day save someone's neck.

Ich beginne mit einem Gedicht von Koepsell, das in Frage stellt, ob das Schreiben von Gedichten in Zeiten politischer Umwälzungen gerechtfertigt ist und ob Worte Menschen den Hals retten können. Die Gedichtsammlung *Die Akte James Knopf* wird auf mögliche Antworten auf diese Fragen hin untersucht. José Medina konzeptualisiert den epistemischen Tod und Koepsell zeigt, wie nahe der epistemische dem tatsächlichen Tod ist. Ich interpretiere *Die Akte James Knopf* als Beweis-dossier für einen epistemischen Mord. Es deckt die Mechanismen der rassifizierten Wissensproduktion/-erhaltung auf und produziert das, was David Lloyd 'poetic justice' nennt. Medina konzipiert den Begriff 'guerilla pluralism', den ich in diesem Zusammenhang als 'provoking pluralism' bezeichne, weil er sprachliche Interventionen gegenüber Gewalt bevorzugt. Die Grammatik wie die Wirkungen des 'provoking pluralism' sind gleichzeitig irritierend und generativ. Als verwandter Begriff konzeptualisiere ich 'guerilla epistemology', die eine Umkehrung oder Revolution des epistemischen Privilegs bewirkt. Koepsell räumt provokant ein, dass Gewalt in Form von epistemischer Ungerechtigkeit wie andere Arten von Gewalt mit Vergnügen verbunden ist: Rassifizierte Ungerechtigkeit verkauft sich. Mit seiner Poesie und seinem strategischen Einsatz von Humor

<sup>1</sup>Huge thanks to my colleague and collaborator Dr Stephanie Galasso, who introduced me both to Koepsell's work and to David Lloyd's essay 'Nomos and Lyric: On Poetry and Justice', in *Law, Culture and the Humanities* (2017), pp. 1–17. Thanks too to the research group 'Fictions of the Rechtsstaat': Dr Ivana Perica, Dr Kyung-Ho Cha, Dr Stephanie Galasso, Dr Johanna-Charlotte Horst, Dr Leila Mukhida, Dr Charlotte Woodford and Professor Susanne Lüdemann, for stimulating discussions around issues of literature and the law.

erzeugt er 'Gegenvergnügen', das herrschende Wissenssysteme infiltriert und Veränderungen anregt. Das könnte eines Tages jemandem den Hals retten.

One day I will crash into  
the ghost of my father  
on a tarred road, on its last stretch between  
dusty Mapungubwe and the Harz mountain barrages  
without a last witness to see me  
dead or alive  
and I will have to answer  
why I dawdled through days and dog years  
while the world fell victim  
to bush fires and famines  
pandemics and racist politicians  
and why  
I spent ages matching the beat with the rhyme  
and stared holes into white washed walls  
on wednesday afternoons  
when time was of the essence.  
and already I'm afraid  
not to know the word that might just  
save my neck  
that day.<sup>2</sup>

In the tradition of poems like Bertolt Brecht's 'Schlechte Zeit für Lyrik',<sup>3</sup> Philipp Khabo Koepsell's 'when time was of the essence' raises the question whether it is justified to craft a poem in times of political and social crisis. Instead of taking direct action, the poet spends 'ages matching the beat with the rhyme' – not at weekends, as a leisure activity (the acceptable face of the arts), but mid-week, 'on wednesday afternoons'. Questions lurk about whether writing poetry is politically defensible (and whether it counts as work).

Running from or towards something unspecified, the poet imagines 'crashing into' his father's ghost. The 'tarred road' where the imagined crash happens links southern Africa and central Europe like a synapse connecting plural national and continental identities.<sup>4</sup> But Mapungubwe

<sup>2</sup> Philipp Khabo Koepsell, 'when time was of the essence'. In Koepsell, *Die Akte James Knopf: Afrodeutsche Wort- und Streikunst*, Münster 2010, p. 37; the poem is also track 14 of Koepsell's spoken word album *Word of Mouth* (2014).

<sup>3</sup> Bertolt Brecht, *Gesammelte Gedichte*, 4 vols, Frankfurt a. M. 1976, II, pp. 743–4.

<sup>4</sup> Priscilla Layne has observed how Koepsell 'insists on the acceptance of a multilingual reality'. Layne, *White Rebels in Black: German Appropriation of Black Popular Culture*, Ann Arbor 2018, p. 174. 'I use languages interchangeably', Koepsell himself commented during the zoom discussion 'Black Lives Matter in German History', Institute for Historical Research, University of London, on 14 October 2020. A recording is available online: <https://www.history.ac.uk/seminars/modern-german-history> (accessed 26 October 2020).

and the Harz mountains are also places of plural belonging on their respective continents: the ancient Kingdom of Mapungubwe now straddles the borders of three countries (South Africa, Botswana and Zimbabwe); the Harz mountains are in Germany but straddle three federal states (Lower Saxony, Saxony-Anhalt and Thuringia). They are places of mythical significance, and therefore appropriate places to meet a ghost.

Paternal phantoms transport questions about responsibility in the world: when Hamlet encounters his father's ghost, he has to avenge a murder, taking responsibility for damage done to the family, and Koepsell's spectral patriarch is the spirit of his son's responsibility for damage being done to the world. Like Hamlet, the poet is anxious:

[...] afraid  
not to know the word that might just  
save my neck  
that day.

That second sentence in a two-sentence poem offers layers of meaning. Is there a word to answer the ghost that will pacify it, saving the father-son relationship; and/or will staring at walls and matching the beat with the rhyme provide the right word to save the world – and the poet – from greed and hate? At the same time, in a response to the still-echoing criticism of the poet as a dawdler, the sentence insists on the significance of the word as the *only* thing that can save his neck, and perhaps the world's. The right word might not only pacify one's ancestors, but address famine, fire, racism and pandemics.

Hamlet's response to his father's demand for justice is to stage a murder mystery: *The Mousetrap*. The title of Koepsell's poetry collection – *Die Akte James Knopf* (2010) – could also announce a murder mystery. A legal dossier (*Akte*) is implicitly put before us, and a case seems about to be re-opened. The expectation is awakened that *new knowledge* will emerge about the victim and/or the perpetrator. The dossier might be, as Priscilla Layne observes, a criminal record, casting Knopf as a perpetrator; there are also good reasons to believe that James Knopf has been a victim (this need not be an either/or situation).<sup>5</sup> I am going to suggest that *Die Akte James Knopf* stages an investigation of violence, implicitly demanding that its audience reconsider racialised assumptions about who is a perpetrator, and who a victim. As well as unpacking and exposing social and epistemic injustice (as explored by Patricia Hill Collins, Miranda Fricker, José Medina, and others),<sup>6</sup> it answers Koepsell's own questions in 'when time was of the

<sup>5</sup> See Layne, *White Rebels* (note 4), p. 166. To borrow from María Lugones, to whom I will come later, we might see Knopf as an 'oppressed <-> resisting' subject. See Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition against Multiple Oppressions*, Lanham 2003.

<sup>6</sup> See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2nd edn, New York and London 2009 (2000); Miranda Fricker, *Epistemic Injustice*:

essence' about the justification of poetry – about how words might save necks.

Building on the notion of social death, which occurs 'when people are deprived of rights and liberties and not given full status of subjects under the law', Medina has offered the notion of epistemic death, which occurs 'when a subject's epistemic capacities are not recognized and she is given no standing or a diminished standing in existing epistemic activities and communities.'<sup>7</sup> Jumping off from that, I want to develop the concept of epistemic murder, which recognises epistemic death as violent and unnatural. Hamlet's play-within-a-play reveals his father's death as (physical) murder and Claudius as guilty. The theatre and the courtroom have a longstanding relationship, which is not only architectural: theatricality informs the testimonial dynamics of the court of law, where the prosecution and defence perform their respective stories for the judge and jury. Koepsell's collection begins by taking us into the theatre – its opening line is 'Vorhang auf!'<sup>8</sup> – before presenting us with poetically framed testimony to racialised violence in colonial and contemporary history and culture. I shall argue that it is both a poetry collection and a dossier of evidence for the prosecution in a case of epistemic murder.

In Anthony Reed's terms, political aesthetics open 'new horizons of thinking by calling into question the grounds of knowledge'.<sup>9</sup> Here I trace Koepsell's aesthetic strategies for intervening in and disrupting (violent) dominant knowledge, which I call guerilla epistemology (which operates a reversal, or revolution, of epistemic privilege) and provoking pluralism (which is related to Medina's notion of epistemic friction).<sup>10</sup> Koepsell's poetic writing 'thinks differently',<sup>11</sup> not least in its recognition that the violence of epistemic injustice is, like other kinds of violence, tied to *pleasure*. With his poetry and strategic use of humour, I shall argue, Koepsell produces *counter-pleasure* to infiltrate dominant knowledge and stimulate

*Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, Oxford 2007; José Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance. Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and Resistant Imaginations*, Oxford 2013. See also e.g. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. P. Williams and L. Chrisman, Hemel Hempstead 1993 [1988], pp. 66–111, and Luvell Anderson, 'Epistemic Injustice and the Philosophy of Race', in Ian James Kidd, José Medina and Gaile Pohlhaus Jr (eds), *The Routledge Handbook of Epistemic Injustice*, London 2019 (2017), pp. 139–48.

<sup>7</sup> José Medina, 'Epistemic Injustice and Epistemologies of Ignorance', in Paul C. Taylor, Linda Martín Alcoff and Luvell Anderson (eds), *The Routledge Companion to the Philosophy of Race*, New York 2018, pp. 247–60 (p. 254).

<sup>8</sup> Koepsell, 'Die Akte James Knopf', in *Die Akte* (note 2), pp. 5–6 (p. 5).

<sup>9</sup> Anthony Reed, *Freedom Time: The Poetics and Politics of Black Experimental Writing*, Baltimore 2014, p. 207.

<sup>10</sup> José Medina, 'Toward a Foucaultian Epistemology of Resistance: Counter-Memory, Epistemic Friction, and Guerilla Pluralism', in *Foucault Studies*, 12 (2011), 9–35 (21).

<sup>11</sup> Reed observes that an innovative aesthetics characterises 'writing that *thinks differently*'. Reed, *Freedom Time* (note 9), p. 210.

change. *Die Akte James Knopf* thus both seeks and produces what David Lloyd has called poetic justice.<sup>12</sup>

## POETRY AND JUSTICE

And already I'm afraid  
not to know the word that might just  
save my neck  
that day.

In 'when time was of the essence', *the word* is grammatically singular. In the Bible (and also in Goethe's *Faust*, a point of reference for so many German writers), the word is *in the beginning* – it is generative, and its teleology is potentially infinitely plural. Koepsell's poetic voice establishes a plural identity that resides in southern Africa and central Europe. But the poem also points to plurality as an aesthetic principle, symbolised by Mapungubwe and the Harz mountains and exemplified in the poetic layers of meaning which operate simultaneously.

Epistemic pluralism – the co-existence of multiple points of view, epistemic systems, or knowledges – is characteristic of poetic and literary writing. Arguably it is what distinguishes poetic and literary writing from other forms of discourse and textual production. David Lloyd calls its effect 'poetic justice', arguing that poetry, through its 'proliferation of meaning through tropes, and its delay of the arrival of sense', offers 'a model of justice beyond the law'.<sup>13</sup> Others have suggested that the proliferation of meaning Lloyd describes characterises all literary writing, not just poetry.<sup>14</sup> And the law is not the *only* entity that poetic pluralism transcends: in her essay 'Poetry is not a Luxury', Audre Lorde envisioned poetic writing that transcends conventional meanings, laying 'the foundations for a future of change'.<sup>15</sup> Poetic or literary writing thus transcends *dominant discourse*, of which the law is one powerful iteration.

Lloyd's notion of 'poetic justice' is nonetheless valuable, not least because it takes the multiperspectival quality of literary writing and links it to the production of legal and social justice. Poetic justice is not just an ethical-aesthetic but also a political-aesthetic principle: it is a strategy for change. Lorde championed poetry that 'gives name to the nameless so it can be

<sup>12</sup> Lloyd, 'Nomos and Lyric' (note 1).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 1–2.

<sup>14</sup> See e.g. Michael Eskin, 'On Literature and Ethics', *Poetics Today*, 25 (2004), 573–94; Jane Adamson, 'Against tidiness: Literature and/versus moral philosophy', in *Renegotiating Ethics in Literature, Philosophy, and Theory*, ed. Adamson, Richard Freadman and David Parker, Cambridge 1998, pp. 84–110; Iris Murdoch, 'Against Dryness: A Polemical Sketch', *Encounter*, 16 (1961), 16–20; Sarah Colvin, 'Leaning In: Why and How I Still Study The German', *GLL*, 69 (January 2016), 123–41.

<sup>15</sup> Audre Lorde, 'Poetry Is Not a Luxury,' in Lorde, *Your Silence Will Not Protect You*, London 2017, pp. 7–11 (pp. 8–9).

thought'.<sup>16</sup> Her essay was addressed to women of Colour, as poets whose lived experience is excluded and obscured by dominant culture. That kind of discursive violence creates a need, in Medina's terms, 'to cultivate sustainable insurrectionary acts'; in Lorde's, to cultivate poetry.<sup>17</sup>

#### WHO OWNS THE WORD?

we can't really be racist  
because  
we say what is racist  
we say what is not<sup>18</sup>

Since the 1980s, when the Afro-German movement began to articulate a rejection of white German epistemology,<sup>19</sup> there has been an ongoing discussion around who gets to say when language is or is not racist, violent, and inappropriate. In a game-changing volume of essays and poetry published in 1986, *Farbe bekennen: Afro-deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte*, May Ayim, a poet and intellectual and co-founder of the Afro-German movement, provided an analysis of everyday racism in works of German-language children's literature, including Michael Ende's *Jim Knopf und Lukas der Lokomotivführer* (1960), which uses the N-word as well as reproducing other racist stereotypes.<sup>20</sup> Ayim noted a widespread use in children's literature of colonial clichés of lazy, ugly, stupid, exotic or terrifying Africans who (like Ende's little Jim Knopf) seem to need white people to show them the way. Ende's work appeared with the same publishing house (Thienemann) as that of another prominent children's author, Otfried Preußler. Before he died in 2013 (and twenty-five years after Ayim wrote her critique) Preußler authorised amendments to his popular story *Die kleine Hexe* (1957) to remove racist content, enflaming the so-called *Kinderbuchdebatte*. In 2015, twenty years after Ende's death (and five years after the publication of *Die Akte James Knopf*), Thienemann decided that the N-word should be retained in the fiftieth anniversary edition of Ende's *Jim Knopf*. The managing director, Klaus Willberg, declared that the work would be falsified ('verfälscht') if the N-word were removed. 'Ganz

<sup>16</sup> Lorde, 'Poetry' (note 15), p. 8.

<sup>17</sup> Medina, 'Epistemic Injustice' (note 7), pp. 248–50.

<sup>18</sup> Koepsell, 'The Academic Void', in Koepsell, *Die Akte* (note 2), p. 16.

<sup>19</sup> See Tiffany N. Florvil, *Mobilizing Black Germany: Afro-German Women and the Making of a Transnational Movement*, Urbana 2020.

<sup>20</sup> May Opitz [= May Ayim], 'Rassismus hier und heute', in Katharina Oguntoye, May Opitz and Dagmar Schulz (eds), *Farbe bekennen: Afro-deutsche Frauen auf den Spuren ihrer Geschichte*, Frankfurt a. M. 1992, pp. 127–44 (p. 127).

abgesehen davon', he continued, 'dass wir daran auch gar kein Interesse haben'.<sup>21</sup>

Koepsell's *Die Akte James Knopf* seems to conjure Ayim's presence, not only in the ironic reference to Ende's novel, but in its use (in the subtitle, *Afrodeutsche Wort- und Streitkunst*) of the descriptor Afro-German. The cover shows an adult figure in the dungarees and red polo neck worn in the 1960s illustrations of Ende's protagonist. Koepsell's version has a baseball bat over his shoulder and a disaffected scowl rather than a childlike smile on his face. The baseball bat evokes not only a permanent readiness to encounter violence, but also a US American context where racial inequality is expressed among other things in the proportion of the male African American population with a criminal record.<sup>22</sup> As Layne observes, James Knopf is the socio-economically indicated grown-up version of little Jim.<sup>23</sup>

In the opening poem, also called 'Die Akte James Knopf', little Jim is remembered by the implicitly white narrative voice as a figure whose racialisation he found pleasurable as a child: 'Wir brauchen Jim Knopf!'. But the sentimental pathos becomes real-world bathos: 'Wie, der sitzt noch zwei Jahre ab?'<sup>24</sup> The poem is reminiscent of the comic *Vorspiel auf dem Theater* that opens Goethe's *Faust*. Like Goethe, Koepsell parodies commercialism in the theatre world; unlike Goethe's, his focus is on the commodification of racialised otherness in a receptive marketplace. In a stream of opportunistic consciousness, the narrative voice of the poem, which seems to echo the theatre director figure in *Faust*, runs through what sells seats:

kalkulierte Au-then-ti-zi-tät  
setzt sich im Rampenlicht ab  
vom schmierigen Alltagsgrau.  
Scheiße! Irgendwas fürs Herz!  
[Applaus]  
Ne Lachnummer für Klein und Groß  
Maskiert als tunesischer Habenichts und Tunichtgut. Oder, ey!  
Namibischer Feuerakrobat verliebt sich in die Redakteurin vom Kochduell!  
[...]

<sup>21</sup> There was a lot of interest, by contrast, when the white journalist Julia Voss wrote an article 'proving' that Ende's novel was anti-racist in its intention, as if this justified the retention of racist vocabulary. Priscilla Layne offers a rather different reading of the novel, showing how it demonstrates 'how to assume a superior position toward racial Others' and 'how to colonize'. See Layne, *White Rebels* (note 4), p. 166; also Andrea Kachelrieß, 'Vom 'Sarotti-Mohr' zum 'kleinen Neger' Jim Knopf: Nostalgie, Kultur oder doch Rassismus?', *Stuttgarter Zeitung*, 11 April 2019, <https://www.stuttgarter-zeitung.de/inhalt.vom-sarotti-mohr-zum-kleinen-neger-jim-knopf-nostalgie-kultur-oder-doch-rassismus.43097c36-b132-4b96-ae6-84b5bd2e6cdc.html> (accessed 9 July 2020).

<sup>22</sup> The figure of 33% was established by academics at the University of Georgia in 2017. See <https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/09/170928121641.htm> (accessed 10 July 2020).

<sup>23</sup> Layne, *White Rebels* (note 4), p. 166.

<sup>24</sup> Koepsell, 'Die Akte James Knopf' (note 8), p. 6.

Wir brauchen Politik

Moslems und so ... Rainer, ham wir Moslems? (p. 6)

The theatre director is simultaneously recognisable as the fool: here and elsewhere, conventions associated with the old traditional Hanswurst figure in German theatre, particularly coarseness and coarse language, expose everyday racists as (among other things) abject fools.

The opening poem takes us into the theatre and stages the racialised epistemic violence of opportunism in the cultural sphere. It is followed in the collection by supporting evidence in the form of a fictional dictionary entry, titled 'Begriffserklärung: N-Wort':

1. Koloniale Phantasiegestalt, dehumanisierte Projektionsfläche rassistisch-motivierter gefühlter Überlegenheit weißer Menschen (*White Supremacy*): Kannibale mit ausgeprägtem Sexualtrieb; meist bekleidet mit Bast- oder Bananenrock und Knochenpiercing durch Nase und Ohren. Kulturelles Merkmal des N.s ist seine Unfähigkeit der sprachl. Artikulation und des kohärenten Denkens. Dargestellt wird der N. meist in zeitgenössischen Comics, Kinderbüchern und pornographischen Magazinen.
2. Einfaches deutsches Kartenspiel, ähnlich dem Mau-Mau. (p. 7)

In section 1 (and therefore, according to dictionary standards, in the same semantic field), a critically aware definition is followed by a series of racist stereotypes that juxtapose the denial of the capacity of language ('Kulturelles Merkmal des N.s ist seine Unfähigkeit der sprachl. Artikulation') with the denial of reason ('seine Unfähigkeit [...] des kohärenten Denkens') (p. 7). Both are historical tropes for the denial of full human status, which is a condition of epistemic murder. The apparent bathos of the second section is misleading: the juxtaposition of 'einfach' and 'deutsch' link those two words in an ambiguous manner that can be read to connote either German straightforwardness or German ignorance. The latter is indicated by the reference to the card game, Mau-Mau: a trivial pursuit named for a bloody, brutally suppressed uprising against British colonial rule in Kenya that ended in over a thousand executions by hanging.<sup>25</sup> Most players of the game enjoy what Medina calls 'the privilege of not knowing or of not needing to know', or perhaps of 'needing not to know' that brutal history.<sup>26</sup>

A number of the poems that follow call out the university as a collaborator in epistemic murder. 'The Academic Void' puts academic Africanists in the dock and ventriloquises their testimony:

<sup>25</sup> 'Mau Mau uprising: Bloody history of Kenya conflict'. BBC News. Online: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-12997138> (accessed 10 August 2020).

<sup>26</sup> Medina, *The Epistemology of Resistance* (note 6), pp. 32–34.



No, we can't really be racist  
 because we talk about Africa all day  
 [...]

See? No, we can't really be racist  
 because  
 we say what is racist  
 we say what is not  
 we say you are wrong  
 and therefore expect your apology  
 by 10 a.m. tomorrow morning. (p. 16)

Koepsell himself studied 'Afrikanistik' alongside English Literature. A longer poem, 'The Brainage' (pp. 8–12), which was almost simultaneously published in a reference work on language and racism,<sup>27</sup> was written (as Koepsell explains in the spoken word version) to open a conference on racism in academia. Both the conference and the poem were a response to the dominance of African Studies in Germany by white academics. Layne has noted that the poem evokes 'the [Foucauldian] problem of knowledge and power'; it also echoes Foucault's irritated critique of the academy's exclusion of certain knowledges and knowers.<sup>28</sup> 'The Brainage' uncovers the mechanisms of epistemic injustice, exposing epistemic over-privilege as a reductive, not generative, force.

The opening sections ventriloquise the rhetorically empowering 'we' form that is still used to signal authority in academic discourse:

Wir selektieren und klassifizieren in selektive Einheiten wie klassisch und primitiv;  
 wir schlagen echte Menschen tot und fressen sie.

Racist fantasies about cannibals echo, but the tables are turned, and the empowered-naïve 'we'-voice admits that its own methodology is cannibalistic. The same voice reveals that white privilege is shored up by the refusal to recognise or name itself:

wir reden ja auch gerne mal von strittigen Dingen,  
 doch 'Ra...ssismus' ist nicht über die Lippen zu bringen. (p. 8)

<sup>27</sup> Susan Arndt and Nadja Ofuatey-Alazard (eds), *Wie Rassismus aus Wörtern spricht: (K)Erben des Kolonialismus im Wissensarchiv deutscher Sprache*, 3rd edn, Münster 2019 (2011).

<sup>28</sup> 'What types of knowledge do you want to disqualify [...]?' Which speaking, discoursing subjects – which subjects of experience and knowledge – do you then want to 'diminish' [...]?' Michel Foucault, 'Two Lectures', in Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, Essex 1980, pp. 78–108 (p. 85). See also Priscilla Layne, 'On Racism without Race: The Need to Diversify Germanistik and the German Academy', in Mahmoud Arghavan, Nicole Hirschfelder, Luvena Kopp and Katharina Motyl (eds), *Who can Speak and Who is Heard/Hurt? Facing Problems of Race, Racism, and Ethnic Diversity in the Humanities in Germany*, Bielefeld 2019, pp. 217–38 (p. 221).

This is 'strategic ignorance' – active resistance to corrective information that might impact on privilege.<sup>29</sup> To name the problem and spoil the enjoyment of privilege is to become what Sara Ahmed calls a *killjoy*<sup>30</sup> – in Koepsell's poem, an anti-racist killjoy:

Das ist die leidige Geschichte mit den bitteren Stimmen  
die, – wenn man hinhört – beginnen wie Gewitter zu klingen.  
Das ist der Punkt, wo alle denken 'Boah, nicht schon wieder!'  
und Raucher lieber draußen Filterkippen verglimmen. (p. 8)

White fragility asserts itself, and white supremacy is effectively safeguarded from challenges.<sup>31</sup>

'The Brainage' lambasts what the philosopher María Lugones has called the logic of purity:

in vierundzwanzig Bänden alles klassifiziert  
in vierundneunzig Ländern alle rassifiziert  
in Subkategorien, Sub-subkategorien [...]  
Es gibt keine Nadeln mehr zu pieksen, durch die trockenen Panzer  
seltener Insekten (p. 9)

Methods of classification, racialisation, categorisation, pinning insects to display boards, all demonstrate the 'passion for orderliness' that characterises the logic of purity, which mobilised 'by those who possess both power and the categorial eye and who attempt to split everything impure, breaking it down into pure elements [...] for the purposes of control.'<sup>32</sup> That, Koepsell suggests, is reductive and deadening, even necrophiliac: 'Wissen schafft/trockene Schmetterlinge'.<sup>33</sup> But knowledge can also be generative of resistance, or counter-knowledge ('Wissen schafft Widerstand', p. 11). It generates the opportunity to unsettle or usurp knowledge/power and – in an implicit echo of Martin Luther – turn tongues into knives:<sup>34</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Alison Bailey, 'Strategic Ignorance', in Sharron Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (eds), *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, New York 2007, p. 80.

<sup>30</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*, Durham, NC 2017, pp. 235–68.

<sup>31</sup> See Robin DiAngelo, *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, London 2019 (2018).

<sup>32</sup> Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes* (note 5), p. 123.

<sup>33</sup> The published version reads 'Wissenschaft/ trockene Schmetterlinge' (p. 9); I am citing the spoken word version, which emphasises the pun. Koepsell, *Word of Mouth*.

<sup>34</sup> 'Die sprachen sind die scheyden, darynn dis messer des geysts stickt'. Martin Luther, 'An die Burgermeyster und Radherrn allerley stede ynn Deutschen landen', in Luther, *Werke: kritische Gesamtausgabe*, 112 vols, Weimar 1899, vol. 15, p. 38.

ein bisschen Wissen schafft Gelegenheit,  
 Gelegenheit macht Diebe  
 und – schwupps, hat keiner hingesehen  
 do we speak in different terms  
 do we speak in tongues that defy classification [...]
 we take childhood memories and unfinished conversations  
 we take all the anger, the frustration, the insanity out of  
 cobwebbed corners of suppression and denial  
 we sharpen their edges and place them under the tip of our tongue  
 Wissen schafft Waffen! (p. 11)

The switch from German to English and back illustrates linguistic and epistemic plurality: switching languages augments what is said and sayable. The last lines of the spoken word version offer hope for change:

If you are listening, then you are the resistance!  
 Die Welt wird schon nicht untergehen.  
 Wir haben die Wissenschaft überlebt.  
 Wir können auch neues Wissen schaffen  
 zusammen.<sup>35</sup>

Knowledge can transform and be transformed, providing it is plural. The singular, unified, and substantival (*ergo* static) – ‘Wissenschaft’ – gives way to the first-person plural, disunified, and verbal (*ergo* dynamic) ‘Wissen schaffen’.

Lugones advocates replacing the logic of purity with plural or *curdled* logic. Curdled logic is creative resistance: it challenges ‘the univocity of life lived in a state of purity, their management of us, their power over us’. The practice of curdling ‘testifies to our being active subjects, not consumed by the logic of control. [...] It is a practice of festive resistance.’<sup>36</sup> In Bailey’s terms, it ‘helps shift our imagination to a new realm of sense’.<sup>37</sup> The poet Koepsell, like the philosopher Lugones, turns away from the epistemology of control towards generative acts of epistemic resistance that are necessarily plural, as they allow different ways of making sense to emerge.

## PROVOKING PLURALISM

I tolerate confusion here ...<sup>38</sup>

<sup>35</sup> This is the spoken word version. The printed version reads: ‘[if you are listening, then you are the resistance!]/... und wir sind doch lernfähig’ (p. 12; parentheses in original).

<sup>36</sup> Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes* (note 5), p. 145.

<sup>37</sup> Bailey, ‘Strategic Ignorance’ (note 29), p. 91.

<sup>38</sup> Koepsell, ‘To be filed under .../Thoughts on Gilroy’, in Koepsell, *Die Akte* (note 2), p. 22. Ellipsis in original.

Medina conceives of an epistemic pluralism that is 'guerilla' in the sense that it is non-irenic: 'not a pluralism that tries to resolve conflicts and overcome struggles, but instead tries to provoke them and to re-energize them'. Despite its potential attractiveness, however, *guerilla pluralism* founders as a concept. Where guerilla violence *imposes* the resistant self, the pluralism Medina is describing *exposes* its practitioners, making them 'vulnerable to the past by opening our memories to the challenges and contestations of various subjects'.<sup>39</sup> Koepsell's 'when time was of the essence' insists on the primacy of the word, where guerillas have historically done exactly the opposite, privileging violence over linguistic interventions.<sup>40</sup> Koepsell is explicitly looking for words to save necks, not to justify breaking them. While drawing on Medina's helpful conception of a necessarily non-conciliatory practice, I therefore propose the (less appealing) alternative term 'provoking pluralism'. The grammatical ambiguity points to something consciously irritating *and* potentially generative.

Provoking pluralism can engage something we might call guerilla epistemology, which is not in itself pluralist. Revolution, as its name suggests, is a spin of the wheel, and epistemic revolution *rearranges* dominance relations rather than structurally challenging dominance *per se*. Where 'The Brainage' exemplifies provoking pluralism ('Wir können auch neues Wissen schaffen/zusammen'), Koepsell's raucously parodic poem 'Das A-Wort' uses guerilla epistemology as its first line of attack. It operates a reversal, or revolution, of epistemic privilege as it ventriloquises empowered ignorance in the imagined context of a lecture theatre:

Ist das eine Wortmeldung?  
 Na, jetzt kriegen se sich ma wieder ein,  
 ich hab das Wort doch nicht erfunden.  
 Bedenken sie bitte die historische Herkunft!!!  
 [haha] finden sie nicht, dass sie gerade etwas empfindlich  
 reagieren?  
 ... gut. Jetzt hören se mir mal zu!  
 Zu meiner Zeit, ja – in meiner Jugend – da war es voll-komm-en  
 nor-mal,  
 dass man Leute, Leute wie sie  
 – in unserer Gesellschaft – 'Arschgeigen' genannt hat.  
 Ja, Arschgeigen, ... wahlweise, ja wahlweise 'Flachwichser'  
 so wie in 'Schau, da läuft der rassistische Flachwichser!'  
 Also wissense was:

<sup>39</sup> Medina, 'Toward a Foucaultian Epistemology' (note 10), pp. 24 and 28.

<sup>40</sup> The Red Army Faction, for example, believed their actions trumped words. See e.g. Kollektiv RAF, *Die Rote Armee aufbauen*, in *Rote Armee Fraktion: Texte und Materialien zur Geschichte der RAF*, ed. Martin Hoffmann. Berlin 1997, pp. 24–6 (p. 24).

ich lass mir doch in meiner Vorlesung nicht sagen, wie ich ihn'  
ihre Leute da zu nennen habe.  
Mein Gott, gucken se doch ma in den Spiegel. Dann gucknse  
ma, was se da sehen:  
ja, ne Arschgeige. Legen se sich ruhig ma nen dickeres Fell zu ....<sup>41</sup>

The speaker invokes the epistemic privilege associated with age ('zu meiner Zeit') and with institutional space and authority ('in meiner Vorlesung'). It is clearly a male voice (the level of direct aggression would be unacceptable in a female voice, and would disturb even a parodic reading). Alongside overt aggression, classic microaggressions are used to discredit and devalue the counter-voice (which is as inaudible in the poem as it implicitly is in society and culture): its challenge is dismissed as oversensitive ('etwas empfindlich') and historically ignorant ('die historische Herkunft'). The empowered speaker defensively occupies the space of dominant knowledge ('ich lass mir doch in meiner Vorlesung nicht sagen, [...]'). Syllables are enunciated to underline a dominant linguistic stance ('voll-komm-en normal') – the linguistic equivalent of standing or sitting with legs akimbo. His obvious fragility in the face of the challenge, and his crass historical ignorance, are veiled by his projection of fragility and ignorance on to his challenger. The speaker positions himself as imposing, invulnerable, and closed to challenges and contestations.

Koepsell's ventriloquism of that stance has the paradoxical effect of exposing it as vulnerable, because laughable. An act of epistemic insurrection, the poem striates epistemic empowerment with its own violence made visible, and uses humour (including the absurd vulgarities 'Arschgeige' and 'Flachwichser', and regional colloquialisms) to render the aggressive assertion of semantic privilege ridiculous. Like his poetic predecessor Ayim, Koepsell uses regional colloquialisms to lower the register, thus diluting the linguistic authority of the everyday racists he ventriloquises.

The poem seems straightforward, not least because of its humour, but in fact the narrative voice occupies a complex position. Its discursive gesture is clearly the gesture of educated white male privilege; but it is linked via the colloquialisms (which would not normally belong in a university lecture theatre) to the language of the 'man on the street'. It documents empowered bullying in language that echoes racist linguistic habits, but simultaneously performs an imagined situation where the tables have been turned, and empowered or privileged discourse is aggressively *anti-racist* ('Schau, da läuft der rassistische Flachwichser!'). But 'Das A-Wort' uses epistemic revolution *strategically*, rather than to replicate dominance.<sup>42</sup> It

<sup>41</sup> Koepsell, 'Das A-Wort', in Koepsell, *Die Akte* (note 2), p. 21. Orthography and ellipsis in original.

<sup>42</sup> Bailey argues that in the context of plural practices of resistance even purity can have its place – provided 'it is used strategically rather than to replicate dominance.' Bailey, 'Strategic Ignorance' (note 29), p. 91

responds to the 'willful and habitual inversion of reality' that shapes white perception of the world,<sup>43</sup> inverting that inversion in order to make it visible and therefore revisable.

The simultaneous existence in the poem *both* of the spirit of everyday racism as an aggressively privileged discourse *and* of humorously-aggressively worded anti-racism constitutes both a provocation and a possibility.

#### EPISTEMIC AND OTHER MURDERS

Vieles ist mit einem zwinkernden Auge verfasst, doch ist der Ernst  
der Angelegenheit unübersehbar.<sup>44</sup>

Koepsell's humour exposes matters that are deeply serious. Humour can circumnavigate pain, and laughter can make it possible to apprehend violence and injustice. 'The vicious epistemic resistances that result from privilege are not exclusively cognitive,' Medina reminds us. They have consequences, and 'are intimately related to *social injustices*.'<sup>45</sup> Social injustices, as the death of George Floyd in 2020 helped bring into global public consciousness, are expressed in direct as well as structural violence, also at the hands of officers of the state.

Another poem in the Knopf dossier addresses the case of Oury Jalloh, an asylum seeker from Sierra Leone whose body was recovered from a burned-out police cell in Saxony-Anhalt in 2005. Local police officers claimed Jalloh committed suicide by self-incineration, tearing a hole in the fireproof cover of the cell mattress and setting fire to it with a lighter (an object which police would normally be required to remove from anyone held in a cell).

*Defending Dessau*  
an african man  
burned to a flake and a stain  
on a fireproof mattress on the tiled floor of cell no. 5  
shackles on arms and feet – nose bone fractured  
Suicide! officials say  
obstinate in their refusal to investigate  
the possibility and much more  
plausible explanation  
of him gotten struck  
by lightening (*sic*) (p. 53)

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 80, referencing Charles Mills, 'White Ignorance', in Sullivan and Tuana (eds), *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance* (note 29), pp. 13–38.

<sup>44</sup> Philipp Khabo Koepsell (ed.), *The Afropean Contemporary: Literatur- und Gesellschaftsmagazin*, Berlin 2015, p. 6.

<sup>45</sup> Medina, *Epistemology* (note 6), p. 57. Italics in original.

Koepsell's ironic suggestion that it is 'more plausible' that Jalloh was struck by lightning was supported by later developments: the case was re-opened in 2013, and an independent fire test indicated that Oury Jalloh could not realistically have set the fire himself, and that the mattress, which burned up completely, could not have done so unless a flammable liquid had been poured into it.<sup>46</sup> In 2019 a medical report, commissioned by the activist group 'Initiative in Gedenken an Oury Jalloh', established that his body sustained significant injuries *before* it burned. But the regional court in Naumburg in Saxony-Anhalt has to date ruled against accepting the report.<sup>47</sup>

'Defending Dessau' makes tangible the disturbing closeness of epistemic to actual death. Marginalised people, as Judith Butler has observed, live precarious lives.<sup>48</sup> Dessau, a small town in Saxony-Anhalt, was also the location of the murder, in 2000, of a Mozambiquan resident of the city, Alberto Adriano, who was walking through the municipal park when he was attacked by three right-wing extremists who beat him so badly that he died of his injuries. In Koepsell's poem 'James geht mit dem Messer joggen' the permanent threat of *direct* violence that is part of the experience of being Black or of Colour (not only) in Germany raises its head:

James geht mit dem Messer joggen,  
 weil er glaubt, er könnte es brauchen,  
 wenn er Laufen geht und draußen an der Ecke Glatzen stehen.  
 (repeat 3x)  
 James geht nicht auf der Mecklenburger Seenplatte paddeln.  
 James geht nicht auf Kirmes, auch wenn da nur Nette sind. (p. 53)

The poem accepts the rules of white fragility in the sense that there is no overt naming of the racism or racist violence implied in the reference to skinheads ('Glatzen'), and white Germans at the local fairs are designated a 'nice crowd' ('nur Nette'). But it simultaneously challenges white denial with its grammatically simple statement that James feels the need to take a knife when he goes running.

*Die Akte James Knopf* documents danger in the present (as the backdrop to the baseball bat that the adult James has slung over his shoulder); but it also documents its history. Racist violence in the present is the continuation of a brutal colonial history, and a number of the poems summon witnesses to that past. 'Wir lagen vor Madagascar – in zivilisatorischer Mission' is

<sup>46</sup> Ben Knight, 'New evidence contradicts German police in Oury Jalloh death', *Deutsche Welle*, 16 November 2017. Online: [dw.com/en/new-evidence-contradicts-german-police-in-oury-jalloh-death/a-41413442](https://www.dw.com/en/new-evidence-contradicts-german-police-in-oury-jalloh-death/a-41413442) (accessed 11 March 2020).

<sup>47</sup> Elliot Douglas, 'Germany: New accusations of police violence in death of asylum-seeker', *Deutsche Welle*, 11 November 2019. Online: [dw.com/en/germany-new-accusations-of-police-violence-in-death-of-asylum-seeker/a-51067499](https://www.dw.com/en/germany-new-accusations-of-police-violence-in-death-of-asylum-seeker/a-51067499) (accessed 11 March 2020).

<sup>48</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Power of Mourning and Violence*, London 2004.

narrated in the voice of what seems to be a non-commissioned German officer of the early twentieth century. Layne has noted how Germany's colonial project is mapped out by that voice, territory by territory: it lists countries and islands that were colonised, leased, and 'protected' by Germany prior to World War I (p. 14).<sup>49</sup> Hegemonic brutality striates that past as 'm'-alliteration striates the poem, not only in the dark absurdity of the repeated militaristic call 'Männer!' but in 'Madagaskar [...] Mission [...] Munition' as well as the racialising 'menschliche Maultiere, Mischlinge, mendelsche Sensationen'.<sup>50</sup> The fearful fascination of such fantasies is implicitly resolved in real-life rape as the 'm' sound continues on – 'und manch einer/wird kaum seine Hose zuhalten können' (p. 14).

Charles Mills and Alison Bailey have described the 'willful and habitual' *inversions* that shape white perception of the world.<sup>51</sup> One of those inversions is empowered savagery's projection of savagery on to its victims: Butler calls it the 'paranoia which projects the intention to injure that it itself enacts'.<sup>52</sup> Koepsell's white narrator simultaneously admits to colonial brutality and inverts that reality in an act of projection:

[...] Wir ham  
die Wilden in den Lagern, wir wissen  
was denen wehtut.  
Vorsicht Männer, da gibt's  
Kannibalen und Barbaren mit Knochen und Säbeln in den Haaren! (p. 14)

Physical and epistemic violence combine here in a familiar double-act, where those who are being brutalised are declared brutal by their abusers.

The poem has comedic elements familiar from (for example) 'Das A-Wort'. Koepsell ventriloquises hegemonic masculinity in the empowered first-person plural.<sup>53</sup> Like the speaker in 'Das A-Wort' the speaker uses colloquialisms and naïve juxtapositions ('Wir ham/Landkarten, Seekarten, Sauerkraut und Pökelfleisch', p. 14) that expose the shallowness of his hegemonic authority at the same time as he seeks to impose it. And like

<sup>49</sup> The Chinese government leased sovereign power in Jiaozhou Bay (with its capital Tsingtao) to Germany in 1898, in the face of German naval aggression. New Guinea and Togoland were declared German protectorates in 1884, the Northern Solomon Islands in 1885 and Samoa in 1900. Cameroon was a German-colonised territory from 1884. Germany bought the protectorate of the Marshall Islands from Spain in 1885. See also Layne's account of the poem, in Layne, *White Rebels* (note 4), pp. 168–70.

<sup>50</sup> 'The anxiety around miscegenation and genetics is further stressed by the alliteration', comments Layne. *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>51</sup> Bailey, 'Strategic Ignorance' (note 29), p. 80, referencing Mills, 'White ignorance'.

<sup>52</sup> Judith Butler, 'Endangered/Endangering: Schematic Racism and White Paranoia', in R. Gooding-Williams (ed.), *Reading Rodney King/Reading Urban Uprising*, New York 1993, pp. 15–22.

<sup>53</sup> Layne comments that the poem's first-person plurals 'attest to a collective mind-set, a collective knowledge of the Other and a collective will to learn more about and control the Other'. Layne, *White Rebels* (note 4), p. 168.



the speaker in 'Das A-Wort' he splays his syllables in a show of entitlement to taking up space ('zi-vi-li-sa-torische Mission!' p. 14).

In the next poem, 'Wir lagen vor Madagaskar 3', the comedy disappears. 'da ist Blut auf den Bohlen im Bureau des Buchhalters,' it begins, the lower-case opening suggesting a continuation of the 'Madagaskar' poem that went before, rather than a new sentence and new start. The 'm'-alliteration of the previous poem gives way to 'b'-sounds that begin with blood ('Blut'), repeated three times in the first three lines. The blood is a sign of colonial violence, and the place of the poem is the former colony, German East Africa (present-day Burundi, Rwanda, and mainland Tanzania), in the wake of the construction of the Usambara railway. Built between 1888 and 1914, the railway stands as a sign ('Siegel der Gesellschaft', p. 15) of the 'Gesellschaft für Deutsche Kolonisation', founded in Berlin in 1884 by Carl Peters. Peters was a notoriously brutal and rapacious coloniser, later much admired by the Nazis, who in 1939 named a street in Berlin after him.<sup>54</sup> More blood flowed when, during World War I, the German forces in East Africa – three-quarters of whom were men from local communities – were forced to withdraw in the face of a much larger British colonial army. 'Des Kaisers Kontrolle entgangen' (p. 15), German East Africa was subsequently divided up between Britain and Belgium. Koepsell's poem looks bleakly from a bloody past to an unabatedly bloody future: 'das Reich,/werden zukünftige Kanzler plädieren,/wird neue/deutsche Kolonien/regieren.' (p. 15)

Madagascar was a French colony from 1897 until 1958. It was the location of the 'Malagasy Uprising' of 1947, widely regarded as one of the bloodiest episodes in the history of colonial Africa.<sup>55</sup> In the German context the reference to the island also connotes the late 1930s, when Adolf Eichmann devised the so-called 'Madagascar Plan' as a solution to the 'Jewish Problem'.<sup>56</sup> Koepsell seems to be curdling the chronology to offer a thickened snapshot of a history of violence. The second poem's title ('Wir lagen vor Madagaskar 3') suggests that these poems are not a pair, but the second and third elements in a trio. The implicit first element is a song written in the style of a sailors' shanty or marching song, probably in the

<sup>54</sup> See e.g. Marcia Klotz, 'Epistemological Ambiguity and the Fascist Text: Jew Süß, Carl Peters, and Ohm Krüger', *New German Critique*, 74 (1998), 91–124. The Peters Allee has since been reattributed to an anti-fascist, Hans Peters. See Gouri Sharma, 'Germany: Confronting the colonial roots of racism', *Al Jazeera*, 17 Aug 2017. Online: <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/07/germany-confronting-colonial-roots-racism-170717111448009.html> (accessed 7 August 2020).

<sup>55</sup> See Omar García-Ponce and Leonard Wantchekon, 'The Long-Term Effects of Colonial Repression in Madagascar', LSE/Stanford/Universidad de los Andes Conference on *Long-Run Development in Latin America*, London School of Economics and Political Science, 16–17 May 2018. Online: <https://www.lse.ac.uk/lacc/publications/PDFs/Garcia-Ponce-Colonial-Repression-Madagascar.pdf> (accessed 11 August 2020).

<sup>56</sup> The plan to make Madagascar a Jewish settlement was eventually abandoned. See Eric T. Jennings, 'Writing Madagascar Back into the Madagascar Plan', *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, 21 (2007), 187–217.

early 1930s, and probably based on events from the Japanese-Russian war of 1904–5.<sup>57</sup> It was popularised in versions by Heino and Freddy Quinn.<sup>58</sup> Its sentimental lyrics revolve around sailors dying from drinking stale and contaminated water and talking before they die of young women and home. Madagascar itself features only as an exotic splash in the title – that appears to be the extent of its function and interest for a mainstream German public. Like Mau-Mau, the ‘simple German card game’ (‘einfaches deutsches Kartenspiel’), this ‘simple German song’ testifies to self-absorbed white ignorance.

The poems’ entangling of Europe’s violent colonisation of Africa in the late nineteenth century with Nazi visions of empire in the mid twentieth resonates with historical studies since the 1990s.<sup>59</sup> Benjamin Madley points out that the words ‘Lebensraum’ and ‘Konzentrationslager’ were coined during Germany’s colonial period.<sup>60</sup> But Madley also makes the important point that German racism, rapaciousness and brutality in Africa is tied to the racism, rapaciousness and brutality of *all* the European colonial powers, and Patrick Bernhard argues for the particular influence of Italy’s settlement colonialism.<sup>61</sup> It is worth remembering, observes Bernhard, that Nazi Germany’s vision of empire ‘was crucially informed by the examples set by other nations’.<sup>62</sup> Germany built lethal concentration camps in Namibia in 1904; but the British had pioneered their use during the Boer War in 1900 and had weighed the advantages of genocide – which was eventually deemed too expensive – when the Mashona and Ndebele peoples in Southern Rhodesia rose up against the theft of their land and cattle in 1897.<sup>63</sup> Bernhard uses what he calls an ‘entangled’ approach to history (a transnational cultural approach) to explore Nazi identity ‘at least

<sup>57</sup> See Layne, *White Rebels* (note 4), p. 169.

<sup>58</sup> See e.g. [http://www.lieder-archiv.de/wir\\_lagen\\_vor\\_madagaskar-notenblatt\\_300544.html](http://www.lieder-archiv.de/wir_lagen_vor_madagaskar-notenblatt_300544.html) (accessed 12 August 2020). The website attributes the song to Just Scheu – other sources suggest that his was a version of an song by an unknown person.

<sup>59</sup> See e.g. Tina Campt, *Other Germans: Black Germans and the Politics of Race, Gender, and Memory in the Third Reich*, Ann Arbor 2003; Sven Lindquist, *Exterminate All the Brutes: One Man’s Odyssey into the Heart of Darkness and the Origins of European Genocide*, tr. Joan Tate, New York 1996; Susanne Zantop, *Colonial Fantasies: Conquest, Family, and Nation in Precolonial Germany, 1770–1870*, Durham, NC 1997; Sara Friedrichsmeyer, Sara Lennox and Susanne Zantop (eds), *The Imperialist Imagination: German Colonialism and Its Legacy*, Ann Arbor 1998; Enzo Traverso, *Origins of Nazi Violence*, New York 2003; Jürgen Zimmerer, ‘Colonialism and the Holocaust: Towards an Archaeology of Genocide’, in A. Dirk Moses (ed.), *Genocide and Settler Society: Frontier Violence and Stolen Indigenous Children in Australian History*, New York 2004, pp. 49–77; Isabel V. Hull, ‘Military Culture and the Production of “Final Solutions” in the Colonies’, in Robert Gellately and Ben Kiernan (eds), *The Specter of Genocide: Mass Murder in Historical Perspective*, Cambridge 2003, pp. 141–62; Benjamin Madley, ‘From Africa to Auschwitz: How German South West Africa Incubated Ideas and Methods Adopted and Developed by the Nazis in Eastern Europe’, *European History Quarterly*, 35 (2005), 429–64.

<sup>60</sup> Madley, ‘From Africa to Auschwitz’ (note 59), p. 432.

<sup>61</sup> Patrick Bernhard, ‘Colonial Crossovers: Nazi Germany and its Entanglements with Other Empires’, *Journal of Global History*, 12 (2017), 206–77.

<sup>62</sup> Bernhard, ‘Colonial Crossovers’ (note 61), p. 208.

<sup>63</sup> Madley, ‘From Africa to Auschwitz’ (note 59), p. 431.

in part as a consequence of the dynamics of entanglements'.<sup>64</sup> That runs counter to the narratives of the European nations who have, since 1945, engaged a logic of purity to see their own history as distinct from Nazi Germany's crimes.

#### THE PLEASURES OF INJUSTICE

Es genügt nicht, die Wahrheit zu sagen, wenn nicht  
auch die Ursache der Unwahrheit bestimmt wird.<sup>65</sup>

Koepsell juxtaposes the optimistic vision of epistemic change that concludes 'The Brainage' with the provoking acknowledgement that the violence of epistemic injustice is, like other kinds of violence, tied to *pleasure*.

Wissen schafft Wissen  
schafft Kanonenboothetorik  
schafft die besten feuchten Träume  
seit 'Vom Winde verweht' (p. 10)

Koepsell here reveals an uncomfortable aspect of epistemic injustice that has largely been overlooked by philosophers. Epistemic injustice is the stuff of wet dreams ('feuchten Träume') and a sentimental delight ('irgendwas fürs Herz!', p. 5). In the terms of the poem 'Filmemacher' it is the spice of mainstream life ('Würze in den Mainstream', pp. 60–1).

As Margaret Mitchell discovered when she wrote *Gone With The Wind*, epistemic injustice packaged as sex and sentiment has a market value. Reducing some people to stereotypes and discounting them as knowing subjects *sells*. Koepsell's poem 'Filmemacher' dissects the marketing of racialised injustice in a capitalist economy. The narrative voice is explicitly Afro-German, with an implicit gesture to Franz Fanon:<sup>66</sup>

Ich afrodeutscher Korpus, Träger deutscher Lasten  
Strandgut des Atlantiks, Träger deutscher Masken (p. 60)

As a 'Träger deutscher Masken' (including the Jim/James Knopf mask), the poet curdles an already complex statement of identity by framing it in hexameters with a central caesura, *ergo* in the standard metrical form of the German sonnet as developed by Martin Opitz in the seventeenth century.

The poetic voice in 'Filmemacher' is the voice of a plaintiff, seeking epistemic justice in an opening gesture that overtly conjures the courtroom:

<sup>64</sup> Bernhard, 'Colonial Crossovers' (note 61), p. 210.

<sup>65</sup> Koepsell (ed.), *The Afropean Contemporary* (note 44), p. 33.

<sup>66</sup> See Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, New York 1967 (French original 1952).

Ich, ich klage an, die deutschen Medien der Massen  
die aus jedem Schwarzen Mann nen neues Negerimage machen. (p. 60)

He makes the case for the prosecution, namely that opportunistic cultural producers wantonly perpetuate epistemic injustice:

der deutsche Filmemacher weiß genau, was er tut; [...] wandelnde Klischees, die die Leinwände bewegen; Macher wollen Rollen für schwarze Dirnen, schwarze Dealer und am Ende aller unsichtbaren Fäden zucken Glieder. Puppenspieler geben ihren Puppen nur die Rollen, die das Publikum erwartet – das setzt sich fest im Kopf! Ob Rapper, Sänger, Gogo-Tänzer, Rastamänner, Nutten, Gangster, Macher wollen Exotik sehen; Ein Job für Jim Knopf! (p. 61)

Jim Knopf haunts the poem as a revenant in the racist German imaginary but also as the incarnation of commercial opportunism, via Ende's novel and a range of associated consumer items that still feature the racialised illustrations from 1960. Cultural racism responds to public demand and becomes economic racism: 'Filmemaker machen Money-Money', runs the refrain.

The pleasure that othering, exclusion and injustice provide has been acknowledged, to an extent, in feminist theory. Koepsell describes it in that context: 'there seems to be a certain voyeuristic pleasure when it comes to negotiations of race and identity by the Black subject; [...] I would argue it is a first-degree cousin of the voyeuristic sexism of masculinity. It is a matter of power relations.'<sup>67</sup> The *male gaze*, as conceptualised by Laura Mulvey and others, is an empowered, pleasure-seeking view that is imposed as a 'normal' way of seeing. It objectifies women, often violently. The pleasure it produces is often assumed to be primarily (hetero)sexual – but MacKinnon and others have argued that it is in fact primarily power-related.<sup>68</sup>

The abuse of power is pleasurable because empowered people feel the thrill of their power most keenly when they abuse it ('I took pleasure in making her feel worthless', explained a man who abused his

<sup>67</sup> Koepsell, "Bring Your Own Mics!" Black Performance Art between Political Activism and Cultural Bargain', in Koepsell (ed.), *The Afropean Contemporary* (note 44), pp. 64–71 (p. 65); also published in Sandrine Micossé-Aikins and Sharon Dodua Otoo, *The Little Book of Big Visions: How to be an Artist and Revolutionize the World*, Münster 2012, pp. 86–97.

<sup>68</sup> See e.g. Catharine A. MacKinnon, 'Feminism, Marxism, Method, and the State: Toward Feminist Jurisprudence', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 8 (1983), 635–58.

wife).<sup>69</sup> Power Abuse Disorder has been defined as a pathology;<sup>70</sup> yet at the same time Eurobarometer suggests that one in four European women will experience domestic violence.<sup>71</sup> That raises the uncomfortable question how pathological – *qua* abnormal – the abuse of power really is. In *Are Racists Crazy?* Sander Gilman and James Thomas examine the historical and contemporary attempts to make racism a pathology, and argue that to pathologise it is to ignore a long-term and widespread *epistemic culture* of race and racism. Pathologies are, ‘by definition, conditions of *abnormality*’;<sup>72</sup> where racism or white supremacy, like male supremacy, is demonstrably the norm. ‘The racist in a culture with racism is [...] normal’, wrote Fanon.<sup>73</sup> Violence against those ‘whose powers and knowledges have been demeaned and obstructed’,<sup>74</sup> whether it is epistemic or physical, reinforces and reasserts existing power relations, and is an iteration of power abuse. Empowered people take pleasure in making others feel worthless.

Medina conceptualises the *white gaze* as a racialised ‘cognitive pathology [...] that proceeds through the carefully cultivated refusal to see and acknowledge certain things’.<sup>75</sup> That more accurately describes white ignorance, or what he elsewhere calls *active ignorance*,<sup>76</sup> and again it might be more accurately described as a Western cognitive *norm* than as a cognitive pathology. The *white gaze* is a more distinct and helpful concept if – like the *male gaze* – it describes a perspective that produces self-aggrandising pleasure in an already empowered subject, via the abuse of power. Popular parlance calls that kind of pleasure ‘sick’ or pathological; but popular parlance is thereby ignoring a wealth of evidence that taking pleasure in the abjectionification of others/Other is not a condition of abnormality.

*The Afropean Contemporary* includes a contribution authored by ‘James Knopf’ on the subject of decolonising porn.<sup>77</sup> The piece follows a selection of small ads, collected presumably from real-life publications, in which

<sup>69</sup> Venetia Sherson, ‘“I took pleasure in making her feel worthless”: The psychology of domestic abuse’, *North & South*, 28 April 2019. Online: <https://www.noted.co.nz/currently/currently-crime/the-psychology-of-domestic-violence-i-took-pleasure-in-making-her-feel-worthless> (accessed 24 July 2020).

<sup>70</sup> See e.g. Gerald Zerniga and Christoph Hiemke, ‘Making the Case for “Power Abuse Disorder” as a Nosologic Entity’, *Pharmacology*, 100 (2017), 50–63. Online: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5872562/> (accessed 24 July 2020).

<sup>71</sup> Eurobarometer, *Domestic Violence Against Women Report 2010*. Online: [https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/archives/ebs/ebs\\_344\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/archives/ebs/ebs_344_en.pdf) (accessed 27 July 2020).

<sup>72</sup> Sander L. Gilman and James M. Thomas, *Are Racists Crazy? How Prejudice, Racism, and Antisemitism Became Markers of Insanity*, New York 2016, pp. 3, 9 and 283.

<sup>73</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution*, tr. Haakon Chevalier, New York 1967, p. 40. With many thanks to Stephanie Galasso for the reference.

<sup>74</sup> Medina, ‘Toward a Foucaultian Epistemology’ (note 10), p. 13.

<sup>75</sup> Medina, ‘Epistemic Injustice’ (note 7), p. 248.

<sup>76</sup> Medina, *Epistemology* (note 6), p. 57.

<sup>77</sup> James Knopf, ‘Decolonizing Porn oder: Wie ich einst über den schwarzen Monsterpenis stolperte ...’, in Koepsell (ed.), *The Afropean Contemporary* (note 44), pp. 134–5.

white German couples seek Black and of Colour people as 'spice' for their sex lives. The author reflects on whether those sexual fantasies should be regarded as politically harmless: 'Kann gut sein, dass [...] das Schlafzimmer in eine political correctness-freie Heterotopie transformiert wird, die mit dem Anzünden der obligatorischen Rauchware danach verpufft. Ich würde das absolut unterschreiben, wenn da nicht so ein bitterer Nachgeschmack wäre' (p. 134). The bitter aftertaste derives from the historical knowledge of power relations and their murderous abuse: readers are reminded how, at a time when enslaved African women were being regularly raped and sexually abused by white men, empowered projection produced the 'Super-Gau-Angst-Szenario' of an African man raping a white woman – with lethal consequences for uncounted and uncountable numbers of tortured and murdered Black men (pp. 134–5).

Koepsell chooses to wear his 'James Knopf' mask to write this piece perhaps because he is being a *killjoy*: 'Sorry, wenn ich Dir gerade den abendlichen Porno verdorben habe, aber ich schreibe halt über Rassismus ...' (p. 135). Speaking the unspeakable interferes with other people's pleasure.

#### COUNTER-PLEASURE AND EPISTEMIC JUSTICE

Taking pleasure in the abjection of others is a ubiquitous element not only in sexual and everyday sadism, but in humour. The butt of any joke is necessarily abjected – that produces pleasurable laughter in audiences who feel empowered by the spectacle of another's humiliation.<sup>78</sup> In his contribution to Koepsell's *Afropean Contemporary*, Casanova Nobody Frankenstein brilliantly theorises *pleasure* as the cure for active ignorance and epistemic laziness – and thereby, implicitly, for epistemic injustice. 'Ignorance is caused by a fear of knowing, or laziness', Frankenstein hypothesises. 'To cure laziness you must expose the individual to a pleasurable stimulus. Something worth "getting off (their) ass" for.'<sup>79</sup> Laughter is something most people will get off their ass for. 'Everyone wants to be in on the joke, even if it means being part of the problem',<sup>80</sup> writes Mayo; subversive comedy appeals not only to socially marginalised but to socially empowered audiences, who can be drawn into accessing comic pleasure at the price of acknowledging alternative knowledge.

Some humour, like racist and sexist joking, colludes in existing power relations and feeds a dominant epistemic culture by abjectifying people who are already epistemically marginalised. Racist and sexist

<sup>78</sup> Susan Purdie, *Comedy: The Mastery of Discourse*, Brighton 1993, p. 64.

<sup>79</sup> Casanova Nobody Frankenstein, 'The Monstafarian Manifesto', in Koepsell (ed.), *The Afropean Contemporary* (note 44), pp. 12–19 (p. 13).

<sup>80</sup> Cris Mayo, 'Being in on the Joke: Pedagogy, Race, Humor', *Philosophy of Education Archive* (2008), 244–52 (245).

pleasure – the enhanced enjoyment of social power – is thereby achieved. But not all humour is abusive. Abuse of power happens when laughter/pleasure *reinforces* rather than subverting a situation of abjection that preceded the joke. Comedy, as Susan Purdie observes, is ‘a potent force for establishing a given society’s conventions as internalised norms’.<sup>81</sup> But laughter can also enable a ‘pedagogy of disruption’.<sup>82</sup> A historically well-established kind of joking *subverts* existing power relations by rendering conventionally empowered individuals or groups laughable. Koepsell’s ‘Das A-Wort’ and ‘The Brainage’ produce humour by subverting the university’s empowered ‘monopolization of knowledge-producing practices’.<sup>83</sup> Comedy’s pleurability can effectively seduce audiences into becoming ‘a more knowing, critical partner in examining knowledge’.<sup>84</sup> Even if it cannot *cure* laziness and fear of knowing, it can temporarily circumvent them, to infiltrate dominant epistemologies and stimulate change.

*Counter-pleasure* can be read as revolutionary or guerilla:<sup>85</sup> a poetic version of what the student movement once called counter-violence (while developing its own form of subversive pleasure via the so-called ‘Spaßguerilla’).<sup>86</sup> In conventional joking, dominance patterns and habitual inversions of reality are upheld and reinforced. In subversive joking, an alternative (in)version of reality is imagined. That is not (yet) pluralism. But if inversions – epistemic revolutions – can be *strategic*, as part of a wider strategy of provoking pluralism, then counter-pleasure (like W. E. B. Du Bois’s double consciousness, which Koepsell references)<sup>87</sup> is potentially pluralist because it offers, in Mayo’s words about joking, ‘an invitation to think differently, from another perspective, while at the same time inhabiting one’s own perspective’.<sup>88</sup>

Koepsell engages humour as a force that is generative because comic pleasure trumps the will not to know. To make a socially empowered individual or group laughable is to demote that individual or group from what Susan Purdie calls ‘the power to construct and define *us*,

<sup>81</sup> Purdie, *Comedy* (note 78), pp. 117 and 98.

<sup>82</sup> Jonathan P. Rossing, ‘Emancipatory Racial Humor as Critical Public Pedagogy: Subverting Hegemonic Racism’, *Communication, Culture & Critique*, 9 (2016), 615–32 (615).

<sup>83</sup> Medina, ‘Epistemic Injustice’ (note 7), p. 248.

<sup>84</sup> Mayo, ‘Being in on the Joke’ (note 80), 244.

<sup>85</sup> Vanessa Plumly has pointed out (in a private conversation) that *displeasure* also has an important function, pointing for example to the resistant performances of Nina Simone. See also Charity Scribner, ‘1968, take two: The militancy of Nina Simone’, in Sarah Colvin and Katharina Karcher (eds), *Gender, Emancipation, and Political Violence: Rethinking the Legacy of 1968*, London 2019, pp. 63–75.

<sup>86</sup> See e.g. Simon Teune, ‘Humour as a Guerrilla Tactic: The West German Student Movement’s Mockery of the Establishment’, *International Review of Social History*, 52 (2007), 115–32.

<sup>87</sup> See Koepsell, ‘Bring Your Own Mics!’ (note 67), p. 88, and W. E. B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*, New York 1989, p. 5.

<sup>88</sup> Mayo, ‘Being in on the Joke’ (note 80), 244.



within *their* language-making’;<sup>89</sup> that is, from epistemic privilege. Subversive joking therefore shifts the epistemic status of its target. It also, crucially, establishes the epistemic status of the joker. ‘Power in discourse belongs most obviously to the speaker, but that is at the cost of seeking confirmation from the listener(s)’, Purdie explains: ‘it is the capacity to command such recognition which constitutes the speaker’s discursive power’.<sup>90</sup> When an audience laughs, the joker’s discursive power is constituted – epistemic authority is granted. (This is why some empowered people deliberately withhold laughter in some situations). If the joke is subversive, empowered discourse is infiltrated at that moment, and the joke can become a kind of thought experiment, presenting an alternative reality while circumventing the audience’s laziness or fear of knowing through the lure of pleasurable laughter.

Subversive humour is perhaps the most ubiquitous form of counter-pleasure. When any person living in a white supremacist society laughs at an abjected white racist, that is counter-pleasure. But counter-pleasure can also be produced by skilled artistry. Artistry shares with humour the capacity to circumvent fear and laziness by rendering difficult knowledge (counter-)pleasurable. Artistry (which seventeenth-century poetics called artfulness: *argutia* or *acutezza*) produces pleasure in the form of intellectual/aesthetic satisfaction. Like humour, it need not be subversive – but it can be, and when it is, it can infiltrate dominant discourse and stimulate epistemic change.

Koepsell is a public intellectual and an accomplished essayist as well as a poet. Why, then, choose poetry as a vehicle for epistemic work – why spend Wednesday afternoons matching the beat to the rhyme?

23.17 Uhr

Ein schriller Ton  
schneidet schmale Striefen  
aus der Stille. Das Kreischen  
der Bahn. Reifen schleifen  
in der Rille. Scheiben reiben  
sich am Stahl. Gleiten pfeifend  
durch die Weichen. Räder greifen  
ihresgleichen  
und verstummen  
in der Nacht. (p. 35)

Dropping us into a moment in the day (shortly before midnight) when the broader acoustic landscape is undistracting, ‘23.17 Uhr’ demonstrates what (else) *the word* can do – for example, evoke the experience of hearing

<sup>89</sup> Purdie, *Comedy* (note 78), p. 59. Emphasis in original.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.



a train pick up speed and disappear into the night. Readers or listeners find themselves sensually *in* the experience. Poetic writing can parachute us into someone else's perception in a memorable, because sensual way – we can hear, see, feel, smell, and taste it. Recognising the reality of somebody else's experience is the essence of epistemic justice – and the acoustic pleasure of beats matched to rhymes makes us want to keep listening. That might just save someone's neck.

## CONCLUSIONS: MURDER AND THE WORD

Know that whatever happens now is still only the beginning ...<sup>91</sup>

Koepsell's publisher, Unrast, published his poetry in its series *Insurrection Notes*, and here I have read the poetry as epistemically insurrectionary. Like *the word*, insurrections are *in the beginning*; they look to the future. As a case file re-opened, *Die Akte James Knopf* challenges, and might now or in the future change, potentially murderous dominant perspectives on 'race' and who is a perpetrator. (I suggest that with a weather eye on Layne's important warning of the 'potential danger in the notion that a mere epistemological shift in our thinking about black experience can offer a concrete solution to racism'.)<sup>92</sup>

Observing Koepsell's epistemic tactics, I have made a distinction between guerilla epistemology, which is (literally) revolutionary in that it inverts the familiar, and provoking pluralism, which suggests that new knowledge is necessarily co-produced ('wir können auch neues Wissen schaffen, zusammen'). Both make for what Medina calls epistemic friction, which is crucial to a socially just epistemology.<sup>93</sup> Advocating epistemic friction might raise the question whether racist epistemology must be allowed to exist alongside anti-racist epistemology; that, after all, is pluralism. It seems likely that racist epistemology will continue to exist. But to equate racist epistemology with anti-racist epistemology (like equating so-called 'reverse racism' or 'reverse sexism' with racism and sexism) is to be either naïvely or strategically in denial of the realities of power.

Racist epistemology is, to borrow from Casanova *Frankenstein*, an expression of laziness and fear, and a source of unjust pleasure. Racism and sexism merely reinforce existing power relations, and therefore do no epistemic work. We say, but rarely seem really to believe, that power corrupts; taking on board Foucault's notion that power is never static, we might say instead that empoweredness corrupts, primarily because it offers pleasure through its abuse. Provoking pluralism, fuelled by epistemic

<sup>91</sup> Koepsell, 'Bring Your Own Mics!' (note 67), p. 71.

<sup>92</sup> Priscilla Layne, 'Space is the Place: Afrofuturism in Olivia Wenzel's *Mais in Deutschland und anderen Galaxien* (2015)', *GLL*, 71 (October 2018), 511–28 (520).

<sup>93</sup> Medina, 'Toward a Foucaultian Epistemology' (note 10), p. 21.

friction, persistently unpicks empoweredness and the opportunities to abuse it. As Koepsell puts it, writing of Black performance artists, 'We exist. We matter. We see you and have an opinion that we can wrap in a language that you call your own and we can smack it in your face.'<sup>94</sup>

With an eye to the capitalist economy and the profitability of epistemic abuse, one might of course ask whether the scope to unpick empoweredness really exists. Epistemic pluralism does not (in Koepsell's terms) 'make money-money': Layne has reflected on Koepsell's decision to write poetry even though it is not lucrative.<sup>95</sup> Unpicking empoweredness means infiltrating a discourse that has no obvious motivation to allow it to happen. Yet I am arguing that artful epistemic insurrection can still outwit capitalist and white fragility and create counter-pleasure in the cause of poetic justice.

If you are listening, then you are the resistance.<sup>96</sup>

<sup>94</sup> Koepsell, 'Bring Your Own Mics!' (note 67), p. 71.

<sup>95</sup> Layne, *White Rebels* (note 4), p. 160.

<sup>96</sup> A line borrowed from Koepsell, 'The Brainage', p. 12.